DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 825 FL 024 565

AUTHOR	Magee, Bronagh E.
TITLE	Chain Stories - A Collaborative Writing Activity.
PUB DATE	Jan 93
NOTE	36p.
PUB TYPE	Dissertations/Theses (040) -- Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Cooperative Learning; Creativity; Group Activities; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; Short Stories; *Story Telling; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Use of group story writing in second language classes is discussed, and specific instructional techniques are outlined. In this activity, students sit in a circle and each begins to write a story. The story beginning is passed to the next student, who adds a portion and passes the story on. This pattern continues until stories are completed and each student has his original paper. The result is a number of stories, each completely different, written by the same students. Students then read and discuss the stories, correcting as needed. The activity may be used to review vocabulary or grammar, be included in cultural lessons, such as discussion of holidays or traditions, or be based on photographs or pictures. The activity is appealing to students as an alternative to conventional, more academic writing exercises. Suggestions are made concerning timing of the exercise, group size, error correction, revision, and whether to provide a beginning sentence or have students create their own. Considerations based on students' cultural background or the mix of cultures represented are also discussed. Sample grammar-based, vocabulary-based, theme-based, and picture-based lessons using the chain story method are outlined in detail, with illustrations. (MSE)

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ED 408 825

Chain Stories - A Collaborative Writing Activity

Bronagh E. Magee

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

January 1993

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I first began to develop the idea of using chain stories as a collaborative writing activity while studying at the School for International Training. The Master of Arts in Teaching students were asked to prepare demonstrations for a mock conference on teaching reading and writing to students of English as a Second Language.

I thought back to my various experiences with writing as a student. I wanted to find an idea for my demonstration which would be both motivating and encouraging for students. I remember writing chain stories at parties when I was a child. The activity was always successful because the stories we wrote were interesting. We had fun creating unpredictable narratives. I realized that I actually enjoyed writing chain stories, but that I found my teachers' assignments boring.

The chain story involves group story development. The students sit in a circle. Each student begins a story, and after a specific time allotment, the story is passed along to another student. The next student makes his/her contribution and passes the story again. This pattern is repeated until all the stories have gone full circle and each student has his/her original paper. The end result of

this activity is several stories, each completely different, written by the same group of students.

After the writing has been completed, the students remain in groups, reading and discussing the stories. The students also correct the stories together. The teacher may decide to ask each group to pick its favorite story to read aloud, or publish the stories in a class magazine.

These stories may be used to review vocabulary or grammatical structure. They may also be included in cultural lessons such as holidays or traditions. Students may also free-write chain stories based on photographs or pictures.

I believe it is important for teachers to provide students with a variety of activities. This ensures that all learning styles are being addressed, yet providing students with varying exercises and activities requires a fair amount of imagination and experimentation. The reward is an interested and motivated class. Chain stories receive favorable reviews from students as they offer an alternative to typical writing activities. Students also find them refreshing.

Chain stories have limitations, however. Teachers will not want to use them every day since they do not teach academic writing styles. They do, however, offer an alternative writing activity which students enjoy. Reactions to this activity are generally enthusiastic. Students enjoy reading the completion of a story which they

themselves began. The results are often surprising and humorous.

Chain stories can be incorporated into many different types of lessons. They have also been varied to function at any level. Guadalupe Amelia Adago (Adago 1984), who uses chain stories with children, believes that these stories work well with children because they do not feel intimidated by the format. She feels that the small contributions that each student makes seem less daunting than the thought of writing a complete story on their own. David Spener (Spener 1990) suggests using oral chain stories as a means of sharing troubles or problems. Students' questions and concerns can be voiced.

John E. Smelcer (Smelcer 1989) believes that chain stories benefit the classroom environment. Students feel comfortable and at ease with the format. This activity, I believe, appeals to students' knowledge, skills, attitude and awareness, creating an optimum environment for learning. Alice C. Omaggio and Patricia C. Boylan (Omaggio and Boylan 1984) recommend using this activity to review vocabulary and grammatical structures. This practice gives them the knowledge to use the constructions correctly. Students use these skills to help the entire group correct errors.

Chain stories also improve students' attitude toward writing. They are enthusiastic about this activity. I believe that students who are aware of their own learning

feel a sense of accomplishment. This helps them to lower their affective filters and get involved with writing.

Since my demonstration of chain stories at S.I.T., I have used this activity in a wide variety of classes with many different types of students. I detail the advantages I have found in the Rationale section of this paper. A detailed definition of chain stories and their implementation is included in the Suggestions for Use section. Ideas concerning error correction are also included in this section. Some variations on the basic theme have been added to provide more options. I have included four basic lesson plans which serve as guides to implementing this activity.

My own positive experiences with writing chain stories as a child prompted me to experiment with this activity in the classroom. I remember being so enthusiastic about this activity that I was never content doing one. I wanted to develop materials which would have the same effect on my students. I have been pleased with the results. I believe that by using chain stories teachers can turn an ordinarily difficult and tedious activity into something creative. I highly recommend bringing chain stories into the classroom.

CHAPTER 2

RATIONALE

Writing chain stories is an activity teachers can use to make writing lessons more interesting for students. Chain stories make writing an interactive experience because students become involved as a group during the writing of a story, yet they are encouraged to express themselves as individuals. The stories they write show imagination, not just that a task has been completed.

Typical writing assignments are solitary; however, the collaborative aspect of chain stories allows for discussions within a group. The final reading of the story prompts a great deal of discussion which appeals to learning styles which prefer group work rather than solitary writing.

Chain stories offer students a choice. The teacher may suggest a topic, or ask the students to use particular structures, but students are encouraged to enjoy themselves and make choices in content within the framework. Teachers may choose to be more restrictive with beginning students, depending on their abilities, but students are always encouraged to use their imaginations and enjoy the activity.

This is also a lively activity. Students enjoy writing and reading the completed story. Students often

laugh out loud and always stay on task because of the strange turns these stories take. A group of stories may use the same vocabulary or grammatical structure, but they are all completely different. Students display a sense of humor in their writing. They expose a less serious side of themselves and are often surprised.

Chain stories cannot be used every day, and they do not teach students academic writing, but they can be used in many lessons. Teachers can review vocabulary with chain stories, or practice verb tense. Chain stories offer a chance to practice writing certain themes such as mystery or scary stories. Students can also practice writing introductory or concluding sentences. Teachers can also use chain stories as a free writing activity, providing interesting pictures.

The greatest advantage is that chain stories are interesting. They make writing enjoyable for the students. If students are interested, they will be motivated and will not regard writing as a boring activity. Thus, writing will be viewed as a positive experience.

Learning to write in a foreign language is often difficult and frustrating for the students. Grammatical aspects, such as spelling and verb agreement are visible and thus subject to correction. Written language is permanent, making it easier to analyze.

Writing is an important aspect of English and therefore must be taught. Students must practice writing

skills as they would practice pronunciation or listening skills. Teachers cannot ignore writing because it is a source of student frustration, but should find ways to help students improve their writing and raise motivation. Teachers must also demonstrate to students that writing is a lively, active and enjoyable form of communication. This can only be done by giving students choices which allow them to express themselves, and to have fun in doing so. Chain stories have positive effects which reduce student apprehension toward writing and which promotes creativity.

CHAPTER 3

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

General Directions

The implementation of chain stories is highly structured. Students must follow directions in order for the activity to be successful. It is very important that the teacher not only explain the directions clearly, but also model the activity.

Teacher objectives:

Before planning a lesson which includes a chain story, the teacher should first think about the purpose for implementing such an activity. What will the students accomplish from it? For example, is it being used to review vocabulary or to practice a grammatical structure? It is very important for the teacher to have a purpose because students should feel that they are doing something useful and productive.

Implementation:

The students are broken up into groups of four or five. The teacher may choose to put students with weaker writing skills in the same group as more advanced students to facilitate the error correction process.

The students sit in a complete circle while the teacher explains that together the students will create four or five stories. Each student will make a contribution to an entire collaborative story. The teacher explains that each student will write an introductory sentence or add on to a student-generated or predetermined beginning. The teacher can choose the first sentence or use a student-generated one. This sentence should be written on the board. If the teacher wants certain vocabulary words or grammatical structures to be used, this should also be written on the board.

The teacher explains that the students are given one minute to make the first contribution. After the allotted time has passed, each student passes the paper to his/her right. This student makes a contribution to the story and passes it again. As the story grows longer, it is important to increase the time allotment. This allows students more time to read the previous contributions to the story.

The teacher should not only explain how the process works, but should model it at this point. Although the activity is simple, the directions can be difficult. The teacher should actually sit with one group and demonstrate how the papers are passed along.

It is also important to remind the students that there is a specific time allotment. This is done so as to prevent a back-up of papers. Such a back-up could cause

slower writers to feel anxious and pressured which would add to existing insecurities about writing. The students must pass their papers after one minute whether or not they have written a complete sentence. Their sentence will be completed by the next contributor.

As the students are writing, the teacher monitors the time and tries to facilitate the flow of papers. The teachers should also check the groups to ensure that the directions are being followed.

Comments

Since the length of the story depends on the number of contributions per group, the teacher may choose to form larger groups for longer stories, or else pass the story around twice.

The time limit can be extended for less experienced writers. This will prevent a feeling of being rushed, and will allow the students more opportunity to practice the concept being taught. Correct sentences will provide a sense of accomplishment and success.

Throughout the entire activity the students should be encouraged to be as imaginative as possible. This activity is meant to be a fun way to practice writing. If the students use their creative abilities and senses of humor, the end result will be more amusing.

The teacher can choose to provide the introductory sentence or allow the students to write one of their own, depending on the topic. With a cultural or theme-based

topic, the teacher may provide the beginning sentence in order to set the tone or else ask students to brainstorm a beginning sentence. It is not necessary, however, to provide any introductory sentences as the students can write their own.

Error Correction:

The students correct the stories together. This allows for peer instruction and discussion within the groups. Because this activity is completely student-centered, the teacher should just circulate among the groups to answer questions if necessary. The teacher can also provide an edit checklist to help students to focus on particular errors. The teacher can also collect the corrected stories and make additional comments, or select anonymous errors to be corrected by the whole class the next day. Sentences containing errors are put on the board for students to correct in pairs.

Revision:

Within the group the students decide which story they like the best. Together they revise and edit the rough story. These stories often require revision as they have been written by several different students with different writing styles. Revision allows for additional discussion and peer instruction. The finished product gives the students a sense of accomplishment.

Variations:

Untimed

Teachers may abandon the time limit to allow students time to write a complete sentence. If this method is chosen, students can pass their papers after one sentence has been written. The teacher must monitor the groups very carefully in this case.

Open or closed

Chain stories can be written "open" or "closed." Open stories allow the students to read the previous contributions which are covered up in closed chain stories. Students write intuitively based on the hidden contributions. Closed stories are often very difficult and require extensive revision.

Cultural Considerations

I have based my cultural considerations on experiences I have had using chain stories. Although each student has his/her own specific learning style, teachers can make observations based on the student's native culture. These observations are essential to being an effective teacher. These cultural considerations are suggestions, not judgments.

Teachers who adhere to, and believe in, cultural generalizations demonstrate insensitivity. The idea that a student can or cannot perform a task in the classroom because of nationality or ethnic background is unfair and wrong. Teachers who judge students based on their cultural

backgrounds fail to see students as individuals and cannot meet their individual needs. Students should never be lumped into a group because of their ethnicity or nationality. Cultural generalizations are both unfair and incorrect and should never enter the ESL classroom.

Cultural considerations differ from generalizations in that they examine students' needs as individuals. Cultural considerations focus on aspects such as educational background and native learning environment. Teachers should analyze English language skills which correspond with the student's native language. These considerations enable the teacher to identify individual learning styles and teach to them. Teachers who are sensitive to students' cultures are better able to understand students as individuals.

Chain stories are effective with multi-cultural groups of students. When used with topic- or theme-based lesson plans, chain stories provoke interesting and educational classroom discussions. Chain stories in the multi-cultural classroom also allow each student to express him/herself in a collaborative context. Each student contribution is considered valuable to the whole story. Thus, students are able to maintain their cultural identity while being part of a group.

Writing chain stories is also effective with groups of Hispanic and European students. These cultural groups tend to require assistance with writing. They seem to feel

most confident, and therefore comfortable, with speaking activities. Chain stories enable these students to practice writing with a focus on specific structures, while providing an opportunity for discussion and group feedback. The teacher can teach to the needs of these students without raising their affective filters. When students with writing needs are presented with writing activities which encourage discussion, they will feel more comfortable and confident.

In multi-cultural classrooms containing Japanese students, this activity has been successful. However, entire groups of Japanese students do not seem to enjoy writing chain stories. The culture of these students dictates that writing be a structured and organized activity. I have found that Japanese students tend to prefer highly structured academic assignments. These students have trouble with the spontaneous aspect of this activity. Japanese students often plan the entire story before the writing begins, assigning each student a specific contribution. This activity does not seem to meet the cultural needs of these students, and is thus less successful.

CHAPTER 4

MATERIALS

Grammar-Based Lesson Plan

Objective: Students will be able to use the simple past in sentences to tell a brief story.

Warm-up

Ask a student what he/she did yesterday. Write the past tense on the board. Go around the room asking each student. Once a verb has been written on the board, it cannot be used again. At the end of the warm-up there should be several verbs on the board. Students peer teacher any verbs that other students do not know.

Groups

The teacher counts off students into groups of four. Each student is given a piece of paper. The teacher explains and models the process of writing a chain story. The teacher also encourages the students to use their imaginations and senses of humor to make the activity more interesting. The teacher hands out a photograph or drawing of an unusual or interesting looking person (See Fig. 1). Students are asked to generate the first sentences using the past tense. The teacher can provide examples such as

"Last year Mr. Smith went to France and..." Students must use past tense verbs in their sentences.

Writing

The students are given approximately a minute to write. More time is needed as more sentences are added to the story, as the students have to read as well as write. For beginning students the teacher may want to be more flexible.

Error correction

The students correct the stories in pairs. They are encouraged to use each other as resources. The teacher places an edit checklist on the board to help students focus on particular errors. For example:

1. Subject-verb agreement
2. Correct form and spelling of the past tense

Reading

Each group selects its favorite story and one student reads it out loud for the class.

Comments

This activity also works well with other grammatical structures. In "Strategies for Personalization in the Language Classroom" by Alice C. Omaggio and Patricia C. Boylan, an activity is described in which students build stories with the future tense. The students discuss upcoming weekend activities or other future plans.

"A: First, I'll sleep until noon.

B: Then I'll watch T.V."(21)

Figure 1

Vocabulary-Based/Vocabulary Review

Objective: Students will be able to understand and use previously presented vocabulary in a chain story. In this lesson the vocabulary is a review of body parts.

Warm-up

The teacher begins a review of previously presented vocabulary on the parts of the body. The teacher draws a head and labels it, then encourages the students to come up to the board and make their own additions to the body, correctly spelling the body part. At the end of the review, all vocabulary should be correctly on the board. There should also be a funny collaborative drawing of a person on the board.

Groups

The teacher divides the students into groups of four or five and explains and models the chain story procedure, pointing to the collaborative drawing on the board and saying, "He/she needs to go to the doctor." The students are encouraged to write about the person's trip to the doctor as well as ailments, by using the new vocabulary in the chain story. The teacher can help the students by writing "Mr. Smith needs to go to the doctor because..." The teacher will also have to teach the five aches, expressions such as "my arm hurts," etc.

Writing

The students are given one to two minutes to add their sentence to the story. More time is needed as more additions are made. The following example is taken from a phrasal verb review lesson.

"An old woman got on the bus. She sit down and at last her eyes fell down. She mixed up bus, and she get off. She make sure she drive."

Error correction

The teacher writes an edit checklist on the board to aid students in focusing on particular errors.

1. Spelling of vocabulary
2. Correct usage of vocabulary
3. As a grammar review, the teacher may also include correct subject-verb agreement

Reading

The groups read their favorite story out loud. A vote can be taken for the best story. Students can collect the stories and publish them later in a class magazine.

Comments

This activity can be used with sets of vocabulary words such as emotions, occupations and characteristics as well as with idioms. Chain stories are also a useful way to help students practice phrasal verbs. It is important, especially for beginning students, that some sort of structure or framework is provided. The teacher may choose

to do this or else allow the students to generate the topic. Students prefer to have some guidelines that would narrow the topic possibilities. It is still important to allow choices within these guidelines, especially for advanced students.

Topic/Theme-Based--Halloween

Objective: Students will be able to create a collaborative Halloween story using student-generated vocabulary.

Warm-up

Teacher initiates a discussion about Halloween. The teacher should ask questions which will encourage students to generate related vocabulary words such as "haunted house," "ghost," "witch," "jack-o-lantern," etc. Students are also asked to contribute similar stories and traditions from their own cultures. The teacher writes student-generated vocabulary on the board and helps to explain meanings.

Groups

The students are divided into groups of four or five. The teacher explains and models the procedure for writing chain stories. The students are told to use as many new vocabulary words as they can. The teacher writes an introductory sentence on the board to help the students get started. For example, "It was a dark and stormy night on the farm."

Writing

The students are given one to two minutes to write their contributions to the story.

Error correction

When the students have finished writing, they divide the stories and correct their papers in pairs to facilitate the process. Pair correction allows each student to participate more and thus learn more from the activity. After they have made their corrections, they hand in the paper to the teacher. An example follows.

> "It was a dark and stormy night on the farm. A man live in haunted house. He know the ghost. A witch get married with him. They have happiness halloween."

The teacher reads all the stories, underlines errors and selects 8-10 sentences with errors in them. The teacher writes these sentences on the board the next day. The students are encouraged to work in pairs to find and correct the errors. The students are given back their papers to correct. The teacher should circulate to help the students.

Reading

The teacher allows each group 15 to 20 minutes to read each story and decide on their favorite. The students elect a spokesperson who reads it out loud to the class.

Comments

This activity can be used with many topics, both cultural and non-cultural. Teachers can use this activity to practice writing mystery or horror stories. Students

can also practice writing skills such as introductory sentences or conclusions.

Photograph/Picture/Imagination-Based

Objective: Students will be able to generate vocabulary and use it to create collaborative stories based on pictures or photographs.

Warm-up

The teacher presents four photographs or pictures (See Fig. 2, 3, 4 and 5). (Photographs or pictures with lots of color or activity are best as students have more to work with.) The teacher asks the students to choose one picture. Students then generate vocabulary related to the picture. The teacher should ask questions which prompt student-generated vocabulary. The teacher invites students to come up to the board and write the new vocabulary words.

Groups

The students break up into groups of four or five. The teacher models and explains how to write a chain story. The teacher encourages students to use the new vocabulary.

Writing

The students are given approximately one to two minutes to add their contributions to each story.

Error correction

The teacher provides an edit checklist to help them focus on specific errors. Students are encouraged to work in pairs.

1. Student-generated vocabulary
2. Subject-verb agreement as a grammar review

Revision

Each group selects its favorite story and rewrites it together. The revised stories may be saved and published in a class magazine.

Comments

With more advanced students, the teacher may choose to provide more abstract pictures. Basic cartoons without captions or dialogue work well with beginning students. Students can write a sentence for each frame, which provides a more structured activity. The teacher can also pre-teach vocabulary which may be contained in the pictures or cartoon.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Chain stories provide teachers with a new and different approach to writing in the classroom with this useful and fairly simple activity. Students work together as a group to create individual yet collaborative stories. Although chain stories cannot be used every day, they do provide students with a fun alternative. Students enjoy the variety and the spontaneity associated with chain stories. Students work together yet express themselves as individuals.

This activity also improves with time. I have found that the first time I introduce chain stories to the classroom, the students may be a bit confused by the directions, or might find the activity very different from other writing activities they have experienced. However, if I explain the directions clearly and model the activity each time, the students begin to feel more comfortable with the chain stories.

These students begin to take more risks with their writing. They become more and more involved with the group discussions following the writing segment. Many students need encouragement from the teacher. I have found that using a sense of humor and encouraging them to be crazy

increases their risk taking. I have also found that reading a chain story from another class can give students some ideas and help them to understand the amount of freedom they are allowed with this activity.

In order to maintain this nonthreatening aspect of chain stories, I have found that it is crucial to maintain rules concerning time limits. If these are ignored, a back up of papers may occur which could cause anxiety or stress. Teachers may choose to alter or adapt the directions regarding this activity, but the suggestions provided in this paper have proved successful with this activity in my experience.

I encourage teachers to experiment with chain stories in their classrooms. I have found it to be a fun yet useful activity which can break the monotony of traditional writing activities or lessons involving vocabulary or grammar review.

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